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RUCNARF/ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM COLLECTIVE
RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY 2845

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HO CHI MINH CITY 000548

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SUBJECT: BIG BROTHER PACKS THE VOTE: NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS IN HCMC

REF: HANOI 921

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Summary

11. (SBU) HCMC went to the polls on May 20 to select among 52 candidates to fill its 26 National Assembly seats in a tightly controlled and scripted process. Despite the pre-election media push in HCMC for "independent" candidates, of the 137 self-nominees that registered as independent candidates with the HCMC Election Board, only seven survived the Party's screening process. In ConGen's election monitoring of eight polling stations, there was little apparent enthusiasm among the voters; proxy voting was common. Local election officials hinted at intense pressure to ensure near universal voter turnout. Final results will be announced after June 4. End Summary.

Centralized Democracy in Action

12. (SBU) On the morning of May 20, HCMC PolOffs visited eight HCMC polling stations to observe how the city managed voting for its 26 National Assembly seats. Our visits were authorized by the provincial People's Committee and vetted by the HCMC Party's Internal Protection Committee. A number of plainclothes Ministry of Public Security (MPS) officers maintained a visible presence around us. In one instance, some voters were pulled aside and questioned briefly by police after speaking with us.

13. (SBU) According to local Party organizers, the script for the elections did not deviate from content and procedures of past National Assembly elections. Local preparations for the elections went into high gear at least a month earlier. Ward and neighborhood organizers held mandatory "education sessions" with local voters in which they emphasized that voting is required by law. Local Party workers distributed Party-approved bios of the approved candidates as well as similar, Party-cleared candidate "action plans." In the week before the vote, police-escorted floats paraded slowly through town exhorting the electorate to vote. The day before the vote, election workers went house-to-house to distribute "voting admittance chits" to every registered voter, which the voters

then exchanged for a ballot. The chit, stamped by an election official after voting, served as proof that the individual had voted.

¶4. (SBU) On the day of the vote, each of HCMC's roughly 3,000 balloting stations set up along standardized, Party-approved lines. The centerpiece was an incense-shrouded picture of a benevolent Ho Chi Minh under which was placed the ballot box. Traditional patriotic music -- as well as a new election ditty -- beat away at volumes that drowned out the surrounding traffic.

¶5. (SBU) The ballots were printed on plain paper with no security features to prevent duplication. Voters were instructed to cross out all but three of the five or six candidates on the ballot. The top three vote-getters from each electoral district would be elected to the National Assembly. Write-in ballots were illegal and would be rejected, election administrators to us. After the polls closed, local election workers would immediately count the votes, in the presence of three "citizen observers." Election officials told us that candidates or candidates' representatives would have to receive special permission if they wanted to observe the ballot counting.

¶6. (SBU) Although 60 percent of HCMC's population is under 35-years old, virtually all the voters we saw were middle-aged or the elderly. While balloting station administrators told us that proxy voting was illegal, it appeared to be common practice. There was little apparent enthusiasm among the voters; a "let's get it over with" mood appeared to predominate.

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¶7. (SBU) Local election officials hinted at intense pressure to ensure near universal voter turnout. When asked what the minimum acceptable voter turnout might be, one official told us "100 percent is the safest." Most polling stations we visited claimed that they had up to 70 percent voter turnout by 10 a.m.; an impromptu visit to another balloting station not on the HCMC government's approved list showed a 16 percent turnout. Election workers told us that they would send ballot boxes door-to-door or announce on the neighborhood PA system the names of tardy voters after lunch time to get out the vote. (Comment: The unstated message was clear: those few that did not vote were bucking the system, an act of disobedience that would be noted by the system. End Comment.) HCMC media reported a turnout of nearly 99 percent across the city.

¶8. (SBU) Voter awareness appeared to be low. All the candidates were described as "talented" and "deserving." However, there was no opportunity for the average citizen to meet the candidates or to learn more about their platforms. Attendance at a district-level "meet the candidates" event was by invitation only. Candidates were not allowed to carry out any independent campaigning or to issue any supplementary election materials to distribute to voters. The voters we spoke with repeated the Party slogan that "to vote is the right and obligation of the citizen," but could not or would not articulate how their National Assembly delegates were supposed to help them or their immediate communities.

No Independent Candidates

¶9. (SBU) Despite the pre-election media hoopla surrounding a supposed Party "push" for independent candidates, voters had little variety to choose from. Of the 137 self-nominated that registered officially as independent candidates with the HCMC Election Board, only seven survived the Party's screening process (of a total of 30 nationwide). These included the head of the Marxist-Leninism faculty at a private university, two members of Fatherland Front affiliates, a businessman from a firm linked to the military and the son of former Party Secretary Le Duan. One ConGen contact who ran as an independent

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told us that he was pressed directly by senior Fatherland Front representatives to withdraw. When he refused, Ministry of Public Security Officials ensured that he lost the mandatory "confidence votes" at his workplace and in his neighborhood. HCMC press reported that 27 self-nominees in HCMC withdrew their applications due to "pressing family circumstances". Another 45 self-nominees did not receive the required 50 percent confidence vote in neighborhood polling. In contrast, all official nominees reportedly scored between 90 and 100 percent in confidence votes in their neighborhoods and workplaces.

Comment

¶10. (SBU) The tight control of the entire election process highlights the strong grassroots reach of the Party even in relatively open HCMC. According to the HCMC Election Commission, the results of the election will be announced officially on June 4. Although the process was tightly scripted, the results may still shed some light on the mood and direction of the Party. For example, will the Party allow younger, more open and more business-oriented candidates -- such as Dong Thanh Tam, an influential Industrial Zone developer -- to win or will more ideologically conservative candidates prevail? End Comment.

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